

Responding to the Good News: repentance and resistance (Mark 1: 9-15)

The Baptism of Jesus

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

The Temptation of Jesus

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

(Translation © Lawrence Moore, *Mark for Missional Disciples*, Walking the Walk Publications, 2018)

Commentary

Jesus' baptism (Mark 1: 9-11)

For the people responding to the Baptist, baptism is straightforwardly about repentance and its primary symbolism is about washing. There is nothing threatening about the water.

Jesus is baptised for another reason, however. His baptism marks the onset of his ministry – his mission – and also confirms in his sonship. In Mark's gospel, the voice is for Jesus alone to hear, and it is not until the Transfiguration that others hear the heavenly voice. There is nothing cozy about being God's Son, the Beloved, however. This is not a divine pat on the head and fond ruffling of the hair – God saying to Jesus, "Oh, I do love you!" God reassures Jesus that he is the beloved Son because Jesus is going to have to hang on to that and draw strength from it. This is armour and weapons for the forthcoming struggle – a struggle that begins immediately with the temptation. The point is that to be the beloved Son entails the cross. So for Jesus, tasked with his particular mission, the affirmation of the heavenly voice is also the pronouncement of a sentence to suffering and death.

It is through Jesus' death and resurrection that God is going to effect salvation. Christian baptism (as opposed to John's baptism) is not only a symbol of being washed clean: it is a symbol of dying and rising (as Paul reminds us in Romans 6: 1-11). The picture of the person going down into the water is a symbol of dying (drowning) – and resurrection to new life (rising up out of the water). Jesus hears the voice as he rises as symbolic promise: there *is* resurrection for Jesus, but the

cross is unavoidable. And it is *because* he goes through suffering and death that Jesus is the beloved Son.

Does Jesus “repent”? No, not in the same way as the other people in the Jordan. He doesn’t need to start listening to God and be ready to obey. For Jesus, repentance is about embracing his mission. And that means turning his back on a “normal” life for the sake of the Kingdom. It will cost him everything. His baptism is Jesus’ “yes” to those conditions from God.

The water, then, has less to do with washing for Jesus than drowning. The picture of baptism in the light of Easter is not the waters of purification but of the Flood. This is the ambivalence of the water: the water saves (think the crossing of the Red Sea) but it also destroys. Salvation is resurrection – but only the dead can be resurrected!

There is another important association with the water. “Water” is symbolic of the primeval chaos out of which God “wrests” creation in the Genesis story. The Flood story is the story of the waters of chaos being let loose to destroy once again and to extinguish life. Jesus, in Mark’s gospel, is set in his mission for a conflict against the all those powers of darkness and death that threaten and destroy. They will finally overwhelm him. He will die drowning in despair (Mark 15:34). That is what his mission will cost. Out of that despair will come resurrection and new beginning.

Today is the time for looking again at our baptism. Baptism commits us – as it did Jesus – to living in the shadow of the cross. If Christian faith and being God’s children guarantees anything, it guarantees suffering! And to the extent that we are able significantly to *avoid* suffering, we must ask questions about how faithfully we are actually following Jesus.

Jesus’ temptation (Mark 1: 12-13)

Like water, the wilderness has a deep ambivalence. It is the place of deliverance, where Yahweh takes the liberated Hebrew slaves and makes them into a people. It is traditionally the place where God is to be found. Moses discovers the burning bush in the wilderness. Abraham takes Isaac into the wilderness and Isaac is saved. It was the place where prophets went to commune with God and where refugees went for safety. It is the place where John is baptising – the Jordan wilderness near Jerusalem. And now the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness – the place where God is, but also a place of danger and horror. This is also where Satan and the wild beasts are to be faced.

Most hero stories begin with a lone, titanic struggle. The wilderness is Jesus’ proving ground. Note the time frame: there is no time to enjoy the baptismal experience! It’s straight from the water to the wilderness, for an immediate confrontation with Satan, the Strong Man. This is the one who holds the world captive through illness, religious fanaticism, and “foreign occupation” by demons and empires. Jesus has come to liberate the world from him and free it to become God’s Kingdom. And Satan is not alone: there are the wild beasts – important in the apocalyptic literature that Mark evokes so centrally. In the background, for Mark, lurks Daniel chapter 7,

with the great trial of the earth's kingdoms and the heavenly Son of Man. It is no accident that the earth's kingdoms are symbolised by wild beasts. Jesus has come to take on the powers of Imperial Rome, too – one of the mythic wild beasts. And while Round One goes to Jesus, it is Satan and Rome who will have the final word.

Jesus' ministry (Mark 1: 14-15)

It is against this background of struggle and death that we must understand Jesus' announcement of the Kingdom of God. This *is* Good News! The world will not be left prisoners of the very structures that human beings have created and of the powers far greater than they to whom they have handed the world on a plate. Jesus announces, "This is a *kairos* – the hour of God's visitation! It is the climax of history! And this is its content: the Kingdom of God!"

Jesus' announcement functions on several levels. It is an announcement of victory: the earth is being liberated! At the same time, it is a declaration of war: the powers are being served notice! It is a promise: this earth *will* become the Kingdom. It is a gift: this is something only God can achieve and *will* achieve. And it is a task: this is what Jesus is committing himself to (and by extension, committing his disciples – the church - to also).

For reflection:

1. Do we preach and practice baptism as a way of life? In what ways do you instinctively think of it as costly? How comfortable are you about preaching Christian faith as costly?
2. Baptism is a public commitment to living in the world as though it were already the Kingdom of God. How should that alter the way we respond to politics? Money? Poverty? Possessions? Life goals? Career choices? Climate change and flooding? The items in the news?
3. What do we need to turn our backs on in order to "see Jesus more clearly, love him more dearly and follow him more nearly"? What are the biggest temptations that we face to prevent us living in this way? What does a "life of resistance" look like?
4. If you were to make this Sunday a renewal of baptismal vows, how would you make it a significant moment for people in their journey with Jesus?

Resources

Images/multimedia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FwTZdjU8fWc>

http://www.textweek.com/art/baptism_of_Jesus.htm

<http://www.textweek.com/art/baptism.htm>

<http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-processquery.pl?code=ACT&SortOrder=Title&LectionaryLink=BEpip01>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DuxB1a3NBCw>

Hymns

http://www.carolynshymns.com/spirit_of_god.html

http://www.carolynshymns.com/creator_of_the_water.html

Worship

<http://seedstuff.blogspot.co.uk/2015/01/baptism-of-jesus-january-11.html>

Prayers

<http://rev-o-lution.org/2015/01/02/worship-resources-for-january-11th-2015-first-sunday-after-epiphany/>

<http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/prayers.php?id=60>

Children

<http://worshipingwithchildren.blogspot.co.uk/2014/12/year-b-baptism-of-lord-first-sunday.html>

<http://www.stewardshipoflife.org/2015/01/wet-well-pleased/>

<http://faithformationjourneys.org/?p=1865>

Renewal of baptism vows

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth.

the earth was a formless void
and darkness covered the face of the deep.
A Spirit-wind swept over the face of the waters.

**At the very dawn of creation,
God's Spirit breathed on the waters,
so that they gave birth to all that is.
And God loved all that was born out of the waters
and pronounced it good – beloved and holy.**

In the days of Noah, God cleansed the world with the waters of the flood.
It was terrifying. Appalling.

The waters that had brought forth life now dealt death.
Not all who died were guilty.
The story tells us that only Noah and his family lived.

**God set a rainbow in the sky
and made a covenant with all humanity.
The waters of the flood became a sign of baptism:
To make an end to sin
And offer new birth as God's children – beloved and holy.**

In the days of Moses, Pharaoh ordered the death of male Hebrew children,
but his mother hid Moses among the reeds
and Pharaoh's daughter drew him safely from the waters.

**And Moses led God's people
through the waters of the Red Sea,
to be an image of God's own people,
liberated from all that enslaves
to be a new people of God – beloved and holy.**

In the waters of the Jordan, Jesus was baptised by John
and anointed with the Spirit,

**set apart for his mission:
announcing the nearness of God's Kingdom,
renouncing everything that was not-Kingdom,
embracing the Way of the Cross
and living the life of God's child – beloved and holy.**

Through water, we become part of the story of God's salvation:
of forgiveness for sin,
liberation from all that holds or harms us,
the transformation of this world into the Kingdom of God.

**We who go down into the water
die and are buried with him by baptism.
We who rise from the water
are raised with him to new life,
born again,
sharers in the New Creation,**

children of the Living God – beloved and holy.

So may we who have been called through the waters of baptism
commit ourselves afresh to the message and mission and promise of the Kingdom.

**May we live our lives in daily witness to the God of the Kingdom,
experienced and recognised in cross-shaped love and service.**

**May we live to be a blessing to others
and an answer to their prayers.**

**May our living and acting make a Jesus-shaped difference to our communities and
our world.**

**May we, like Jesus, hear you summon us
to live as your children in your world – beloved and holy.**

In renewing your baptismal vows,
do you commit yourself afresh to following Jesus Christ,
taking up your cross,
and living as God's child in the world,
beloved and holy?

I do.

Remember your baptism.

Remember: you have died to all that was
and are raised to all that is and will be.

May God bless you.

May God's Spirit fill you with the holy, compassionate love of Jesus
and may you know God's nearness, comfort and challenge
every day of your life.

Amen.

(Lawrence Moore)